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Retaliation:

Suicidal Virtue

"TO say that we can't do the dreadful things terrorists do," according to former CIA deputy director George Carver, "ignores the fact that terrorists are not Boy Scouts. The effect is to leave us feeling terribly virtuous but without any intelligence on terrorists."

No one surely now thinks terrorists are Boy Scouts. Few dispute their loathsomeness or their dangerousness or the desirability of retaliating against them. President Reagan always has had the will to retaliate.

But, healthy as this reality therapy has been for the nation, there remains this troubling fact: We've next to nothing to retaliate with. It's hard to think of a more galling example of what Jean-Francois Revel calls "the mentality of democratic defeat."

At the very time that Soviet and Mideast terrorism and espionage were increasing manifoldly, the United States began rendering itself helpless to combat it.

Thus in the face of all the anti-American terrorism in the Mideast — from the Iranian hostage crisis that crippled the Carter administration to all the terrorist acts that have taken place in Lebanon during the Reagan administration — we stand powerless to act.

Each time there are vows of retaliation; each time it becomes clearer that the impotence of our intelligence services makes discriminate retaliation impossible.

Seen in the context of the last decade, of course, this should hardly be surprising. During that time U.S. intelligence became incapable of keeping tabs on things even in the United States, so it is hardly likely that it can effectively penetrate cells of Shiite zealots in Lebanon. Indeed, a new study, *U.S. Counterintelligence Today*, by Francis McNamara, points out that the FBI became so crippled it could not even maintain a file on a violence-prone communist group that had published openly its intention of penetrating the U.S. armed services.

As for overseas intelligence, the CIA was hamstrung by a host of restrictions after the Church Committee report in 1975. The agency's director under Jimmy Carter, Stansfield Turner, gutted its personnel force in the tragically naive view that more sophisticated satellites could compensate for a lack of skilled agents on the ground.

At this point the CIA's ability to keep secrets is so shaky that the intelligence services of our allies want less and less to do with it.

The nasty things intelligence agencies have to do are justified only if they can prevent even nastier things from happening. As for the agencies serving the nice governments of the Mideast and Soviet bloc, they do nasty things to pave the way for even nastier ones.

Thanks to the post-Vietnam blindness of Congress, we must expect far more of the kind of nastiness.